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## **Living with Oil: Towards an Ethics of the Environment in the Niger Delta** *(Pp. 17-30)*

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### **Abstract**

*The vital issues and problems of sustaining the environment for the ever expanding population of mankind are as philosophical as they are ethical. Scholars have in various ways agreed that the issues of resource allocation and the responsibility for both human and non-human components of nature are indeed wholly ethical. However, in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, where the resources that cater for whole nation are tapped or come from, the ethical dimensions have not been deeply investigated, applied or considered towards solving the multifarious crisis that have engulfed that region. The major factor of this crisis is the prevalence of disaffected youths in the area who are involved in militant activism to redress perceived injustice done to them and their environment. Majority of these youths were born and grew up under the military era and so have internalized the culture of violence. Since the amalgamation of 1914, what emerged as the Niger Delta has received wider*

*attention and witnessed more crisis. The problem here is a complex one as it involves human and non –human components that have been exploited, despoiled and depraved. So, it is necessary that an ethical approach be adopted to attempt to proffer solutions to the Niger Delta crisis what we intend to do in this work therefore is to evolve an ethics of the Niger Delta environment which is aimed at looking at the moral angle of the problems as a way of providing solutions.*

**Key Words:** Living, Oil, Ethics, Environment

### **Introduction**

Following the discovery of oil in 1956 and the production of same in commercial quantity in 1957 in the Niger Delta, the region has ever since, not been the same. There have been a lot of commercial activities in the region by a consortium of Royal Dutch shell and British petroleum widely known as Shell BP. The activities of this consortium in the area of oil exploration and exploitation have manifested in the large quantity of this mineral (black gold) being discovered both on land and off shore.

Historically, the discovery of oil (black gold) has brought a lot of money to the Nigerian state resulting in a near total neglect and detriment of the area. According to Ekanem (2010), in his book, *How the Military Underdeveloped Nigeria*, in 1992, 651,000,000 barrels were exported which yielded N609 million in terms of royalties and taxes.

As at today, Nigeria is the sixth largest oil producer in the world and second largest in Africa. The bulk of this Nigerian crude oil is sold unrefined. In 1972, production was put at 2,000,000 barrels a day and there has been a steady price increase. Due to the huge resources accruable from the oil sector of the Nigerian economy, all other sectors of the economy such as agriculture has been abandoned and completely neglected. The focus has been on oil money. About 90% of the crude oil comes from the Niger Delta region but yet the Nigerian government has done nothing to improve, develop and ameliorate the human and non human components that make up the region.

This analysis shows that the region has contributed immensely to the economic growth of Nigeria, yet it is weighed down by poverty, conflict and destruction of the people and the environment. The origin of this degraded and depraved scenario of the Niger Delta can be traced back to the 1958 sir Henry Willink Commission that aptly described the region as being “poor, backward and neglected”. This clearly reveals that even the colonial Niger

Development Board and other post-independence pseudo bodies could not effectively provide solution nor solve the region's myriad of problems

The problems have persisted and by 1990s according to Christian Akanni (2000):

...the place was exposed to pain, anguish, confusion and youth restiveness. Youths which hitherto were at the backstage of events, suddenly rose to prominence and boldly determined events and actions. Companies, especially trans-National companies in the oil and gas sector became the target of attack, abuse, hostage taking and unbridled brigade. Gradually, the peaceful relationship was characterized by antagonism energized by youth violence and uncontrollable emotion. Militant youth groups emerged....

This graphically explains the ugly situation in the Niger Delta. The presence of oil and oil related activities have destroyed the environment completely. The agricultural, aquatic and other natural resources of the people have been destroyed. The source of water polluted by oil exploration and the environment made unsafe for the people.

There exist a greater awareness on the causes of the people, hence, the youths now emerged as the vanguard and epitomized the historical suffering of their communities.

In this paper, therefore, we are to examine the political, economic, social and environmental implications of this blessed but "cursed" region in Nigeria with a view to evolve an ethics of the environment that will provide solutions to the several problems of the region.

### **Oil and the Niger Delta Experience: Social and Political Perspectives**

From our analysis, it is established that the Niger Delta is the oil-well of the nation. This has helped to provide the economic spring upon which the Nigerian economy survives. However, the emergence of oil and oil related activities have severe social and political consequences in the Niger Delta.

The social environment has been seriously affected by the activities of the multi-national companies that operate in the region. Though there has been a high influx of people to the region, this comes with other social problems such as urbanization, high crime rate, prostitution unwanted babies, diseases and other social vices that has characterized the Nigerian society. Indeed, the

Niger Delta according to Ekanem is a microsm of the Socio depravity, delinquency and ineptitude (2005). The Niger Delta region reflects a culture of social neglect and insensitivity of the Nigerian state.

This situation has galvanized into orchestrated hostility which has severally degenerated into both inter and intra community war where weapons of massive destruction are flagrantly employed to wage war of genocide.

The Nigerian state has done nothing to calm the stretched nerves of the Niger Delta people rather than do something positive to remedy the ugly situations; the military had visited more pains on the people. The Niger Delta lands have been ravaged through oil exploration, their women have been raped by soldiers, their leaders have been murdered by the judiciary and the youths stained by state security operatives (Ekanem, 2005).

This terrible situation must have prompted Chief Majemite in an interview with *Tell Magazine* to describe the Supreme Court ruling as its affects the littoral states as putting those from the Niger Delta in “continued darkness”. The Federal Government through the late Attorney General of the Federation, Chief Bola Ige (SAN) took the eight littoral states and other states as co-defendants to the Supreme Court to define the limit of littoral states. In its ruling, the Supreme Court gave all the resources found within the continental shell to the Federal Government. This seriously negates the principles of true Federalism. The littoral states are Abia, Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Delta, Edo, Ondo and Rivers (Tell July 11, 2005).

The source of this problem is that, the Nigerian state does not have the expertise to tap its resources; it enters into alliance with Trans-National Corporations (TNCs). The potency of this alliance can be seen in the conducive atmosphere created by the state to enable TNCs to achieve optimal performance. This usually comes in the form of legislations which often times are detrimental to these communities. In these legislations, there are the insignia of “draconian character” as we can see in the land use Act of 1978, Petroleum Act of 1969 and the Petroleum Production and Distribution (Anti-sabotage) Decree of 1975 (Akanni,2000).

Based on this, Ekanem (2010) opines that, a critical look at these legislations reveal “oligapolistic posture of these agents”. Following this, the TNCs carry out their operations without due consideration being given to the quality of living of the people of these areas, with their deteriorating living conditions, deprived means of livelihood through pollution of their source of water

(rivers), destruction of their farm lands through spillages from oil pipes, and exploration activities, the people agreed to take their destiny in their hands by revolting against the TNCs. The reason being that, so much is gotten from them for the development of others, yet nothing is done to enhance their living conditions and development of the area.

Due to the revolution of the Niger Delta people, those with state power decided to use it to service, protect and consolidate their economic foundation to the detriment of the real owners of the resources they tapped to better their lots. This scenario is better painted by Owugah as quoted by Akani (2000) when he writes:

The state therefore enters into an intimate relationship with big corporations to ensure a healthy National economy. In this process, those who exercise state power tend to reason that since the economic health of the Nation is dependent on the performance of big corporations, the public could, therefore, be best served by service to the big corporations... its services to the oil companies to ensure a healthy economy, the Nigerian state has subordinated everything including the lives and livelihood of the people as well as the environment.

We see from this that, it is the lives and the environment of the Niger Delta that has been merged and sacrificed for the economic buoyancy of the Nigerian state. However, due to the use of state power to provide "secured protection", the TNCs refused to realize that they have the constitutional duty to assist in enhancing the growth and development of these areas. It was on the basis of this neglect that Ken Saro-Wiwa and nine others fought and lost their lives. Akani (2000) puts it thus:

While the state and the TNCs sneaked away billions of petrol-dollars from the communities, the later (Niger Delta) faced extinction and unimaginable environmental degradation and disorientation.

The Niger Delta as we can see has sacrificed so much to enhance the economic development of the Nigerian state without the region being considered for development. The late Saro Wiwa (1992) did say, "Our people have been compelled to sacrifice all life-supporting necessities so that the Nation may enjoy economic boom from the oil industries".

Again, we can see the human and societal damages of pipelines vandalisation, explosion and leakages. This is monumental and coupled with political marginalization the area represents a sad commentary of Nigeria political voodooistic leadership.

### **Towards An Ethics of the Environment**

Ekanem (2002) raised ethical implications of the Niger Delta problem when he defines the environment as that, which constitutes land, air, water and all the physical structures surrounding man. It is the totality of space, time and socio-cultural setting inherent therein. After a careful analysis, he raised the fundamental question: "How safe is the Niger Delta environment?"

In tackling the issue of ethics of the environment, it is pertinent that we offer an explanation of ethics.

Ethics as we know is a branch of philosophy that deals with the basic principles of morality as to how men ought to live harmoniously. According to Joseph Omoregbe (2000), Ethics is seen as that, which deals with the issues or "question of right and wrong in human behaviour".

From this, we discover that ethics is about the right and wrong actions of man. It involves the analysis of actions or deeds and classifying them either as right or wrong. Ethics highlights the characteristics of what constitute right or wrong actions. The reason for this, is because human being is constituted in such a way that, it is not all actions that benefit his nature. There are basically certain actions that do not lead to "happiness or self-fulfillment" (Ekanem, 2002). This reveals that, there are actions of man that are antithetical to his nature and so, militate against his general well-being, happiness and self-actualization. It is inherent in man's nature to behave in certain ways and refrain from acting in some other ways. So, it will not be in the interest of man "to act against the law of nature" (Omoregbe, 2000). To him doing this will definitely lead to self destruction. For man to therefore, live in harmony and attain harmony and true happiness, it is vital he choose the route of moral life which is ethical and conform to the law of nature.

This analysis points out the facts that, there are certain ethical standards that are necessary to avoid internal disharmony within man and within the environment or society. And since, environment is a part and parcel of man, it is expected that man live and cooperate with his environment within the context of nature and the basic foundation or principle of sustainability. The basic way to achieve this is to operate within certain ethical standard.

Without this, there will be disharmony in nature and the society as we now have in the Niger Delta.

The survival of man is dependent on his environment which involves nature. There are certain laws inherent in nature and discoverable within the environment. These laws must necessarily be obeyed without which, there will be internal disharmony. To avoid any consequences of such a disharmony, is to comply to the moral law which is the law of nature. Omoregbe (2000) puts it thus:

Nobody can cheat nature and get away with it. Nature will always have the last word. After the violation and the enjoyment resulting from it, the punishment will surely follow in a manner and at a time one may not expect.

To avoid the inevitable punishment of going against the law of nature, it is pertinent that we embark on the exploration of nature with certain ethical principles that will not provoke nature to react.

Ethics is concerned with the way things should be. It helps to establish a standard of behaviour or action for man. It is about “values”. It is a systematic study of the fundamental or basic principles that underpin our morality.

Ethics as we know it, is both descriptive and prescriptive which borders on the norms of human behaviour. As normative discipline, there exist some arguments about environmental ethics. These involve the issues of the application of the categories of ethics as they apply to human and non-human realities of nature; fundamental nature, sources and methods.

Reflecting on this, Oshita (2001) opines that the basic nature of environmental ethics can be derived from the nature of human “choices and decisions” as these affect the environment. Also, he asserts that all reality either human or non human categories is “anthropocentric” or for this reason we can apply the categories of “general ethnics: to environmental ethics.

Again, taking the Engelic (1990) definition of Ethics as a “displined reflection on the various sphere of life about moral ideas and ideals” we discover that there is the element of objectivity in ethics. Thus notion makes ethics to be seen just like any other scientific endeavours without complete value neutrality. Researches in the philosophy of science have revealed these notions of value neutrality and objectivity as being impossible even in the

natural sciences. Also, it has been acknowledged by natural scientists that “moral values and cognitive beliefs of a culture play a crucial role in how human societies adapt to the natural environment” and the pattern of “political and economic relationships that are evolved or established” (Oshita, 2001).

From this, we discover that for there to be a sound ethics of the environment, the cultural values of the various societies or communities must be taken into consideration. This view is graphically captured by Engel and Engel (1990) as they wrote on the Ottawa conference on conservation and Development which states that “...concrete solutions to environmental problems will largely depend on a new organizational capacity of society as a whole, based on the cultural values of different communities, their creativity and their potentials for innovations”. Accordingly, the conference identified and highlighted five basic broad criteria towards the realization of the emerging paradigm for sustainable development achievable through the principles of a disciplined ethical consciousness. These include:

- (a) Satisfaction of basic human needs;
- (b) Provision of social self-determination and cultural diversity.
- (c) Integration of conservation and development;
- (d) Maintenance of ecological integrity;
- (e) Attainment of equity and social justice.

The critical question then is; to what extent had integrative approach been adopted in the Niger Delta? The emerging and existing scenario in the Niger Delta reveals that this approach has not been imbibed by the multi-national corporations that carry out oil exploration in the area. Again, the government has not helped issues by providing protection cover to the oil companies to the detriment of the people of the area. Indeed, there is a complete lack of basic human needs, no equity and social justice, no maintenance of ecological integrity, among other fundamental stakes or issues. These have combined to create a deplorable state of affairs in the entire region as it relates to both human and the environment. This situation therefore makes the words of Stephen Toulmin (1982) very relevant to the Niger Delta debacle. He says:

Instead of viewing the world of nature as onlookers from outside, we now have to understand how our human life and



activities operate as elements within the world of nature. So, we must develop a more coordinated view of the world to humanity – a view capable of integrating not merely aggregating, our scientific understanding and capable of doing so with practice in view...., scientists have always to consider them selves as agents, not merely observers, and ask about the moral significance of the actions that comprise even the very doing of science.

What environmental ethics demand corresponds with the basic goals of post – modern science which is characterized by “tolerance, discipline, clarity and solidarity within divergent views” (Oshita 2001). However, within the Niger Delta, these basic characters are not only lacking but are absent. The government, the oil companies and the indigenes are intolerant of one another. There is no discipline, clarity and solidarity within the three component parts that constitute the problems of the Niger Delta. The government from the various military regimes to the present presumed democratic government of Chief Oluslegun Obasanjo to that of Musa Yar’dua has been unwilling to implement the policy goal of the national policy on the environment. The objectives of this policy which aims at sustainable development are summarized by Oshita (2001) thus:

- (i) to secure for all Nigerians a quality environment adequate for their health and well being;
- (ii) to conserve and use the environment and natural resources for the benefit of the present and future generations.
- (iii) To restore, maintain and enhance the ecosystem and ecological processes essential for the functioning of the biosphere to preserve biological diversity and the principle of optimum sustainable yield in the use of living natural resources and ecosystem;
- (iv) To raise public awareness and promote understanding of essential linkage between environment and development and to encourage individual and community participation to environmental improvement efforts.
- (v) To cooperate in good faith with other countries, international orgnaiztions/agencies to achieve optimal use of transboundary natural resources and effective prevention of abasement of transboundary environmental pollution.

Practically, none of these objectives is pursued in the Niger Delta with any element of sincerity and direction. The enforcement of environmental laws is a fundamental obstacle in the Niger Delta and Nigeria as a whole. This can be seen in the way government and security operatives treat and manhandle indigenes of the Niger Delta that speak in strong terms in opposition to the Niger Delta environmental degradation. Here, we can recall the “legal murder” of Ken Saro Wiwa and nine other Ogoni indigenes that spoke and brought the deplorable situation in the Niger Delta to both national and international consciousness. The government instead of coming to terms with the realities of the situation, and evolve a collaborative effort with the people and Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) tend to misuse and misapply state security apparatus to hunt the people and executives to either their grave or exile.

The posture of government in the use of state might over the years has created tension in the Niger Delta. The oil companies’ debasement of the Niger Delta land and environment; the military’s defilement of the Niger Delta women and girls, the government security infringement of the fundamental rights of the Niger Delta people., the political and economic deprivation and enslavement of the Niger Delta Area ; the state siege and caging of the Niger Delta elites have combined to create tension, fear, frustration, hunger, anger and provocation, hence, the restiveness in the area and the massive youth militarized activism to defend, protect and demand for their rights.

### **Recommendations and Conclusions**

Indeed, the government’s techniques of coercion, insincerity and polarization of the people have failed. There is the urgent need therefore, for the government to perceive the situation the way it is, and make sincere effort to win the confidence of the people and go into implementing the environmental policy of the nation as it affects the Niger Delta area. This is because, the perception, language and culture are products of man and basically provide the lee-ways or categories through which man understands or appreciates reality either as a fact or value. It is on the basis of this that Bishop George Berkeley declares that, “to be is to be perceived” (*esse est percipi*).

The government should stop the vicious circle of aggravation of poverty and multiplication of environmental problems through debt-burden made possible through the continued physical and mental exploitation of the local environment. It is on the basis of this that Attfield (1999) calls for “some

form of more just international order” which is to help enhance the capacity of the exploited and debt-steeped countries of the world.

Again, the government should do well to erase illiteracy from the Niger Delta. Illiteracy as an index of poverty contributes immensely to the poverty of environmental ethics. The lack of proper understanding of the intricate relationship that exists between the environment and other sectors of human existence leads to the destruction of commitment to environmental - friendly activities. So, we see that education is very imperative towards the establishment of environmental ethics. This is because education aids and enables the human person to appreciate aesthetics in a very deep way. Illiteracy breeds ignorance which leads to the negation of environmental friendliness. On the other hand, a society that is enlightened and educated will most likely promote environmental friendly consciousness.

Also, the government should promote the study of environmental philosophy in universities located within the Niger Delta area. This will generate and bring about the basic essence of the environment, man, science, technology, oil exploration and the interactions with the human agents.

Government should evolve a philosophy that will help it identify and apply certain principles and approaches that will edify the human condition. This philosophy will assist to provide the rationality to conceptualize any plan within the Niger Delta without the risk of self – annihilation.

The importance of this assertion can be seen in the graphic presentation of Oshita (2001) when he says:

..that proactive and sustainable development is only possible when the philosophical growth of a society anticipates the practical complexities in the overall administration of the environment ....

This reveals that a philosophical appraisal of the environmental consciousness in the Niger Delta area is a *conditio-sine-qua-non* for any sustainable development. There must be reflective attitude by all stakeholders in the Niger Delta to scuttle militarized situation as this will further aggravate the already worse situation.

Development and environment of the Niger Delta in the 21<sup>st</sup> century really require a new approach and a collective intervention from all stakeholders. The concern of all should be to protect the cultural and spiritual lives of the

Niger Delta people which is intricately entwined with the network of life-support systems that consist both living and non-living tissues of the Niger Delta area. Accordingly, we need to articulate and develop an appropriate ideology and attitude to practically confront the fear that human beings (government and foreign nationals who are prospecting oil) may be in the course of perpetuating extinction of the Niger Delta and its people. What is urgently required here is therefore, the rational and well coordinated intervention to help smoothen the present rough edges of the link between development and the environment, and between the Niger Delta people, the government and the various oil companies. The various stakeholders in the Niger Delta affairs must imbibe a reflective attitude and learn to understand, appreciate and manage the situation properly. It is when this is appropriately done in the Niger Delta that the functional relationship between development and the environment will provide the gasoline that drives the Niger Delta area to progress.

The recent creation of a Niger Delta ministry is a step in the right direction, but this should be with a specific mandate to tackle the basic problems of the region. Again, this new ministry should be manned by idea oriented personnel with the focus and drive to achieve progress and restore both human and environmental dignity of the region. This should be packaged within environmental ethics parameters for sustainable development.

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*TELL Magazine (2005), July 11*

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